

Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children: A Fact Sheet

What is the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children?

The **commercial sexual exploitation of children** is a global problem that could be happening right in your neighborhood. The commercial sex industry victimizes girls, boys, and transgendered youth.

Commercial sexual exploitation of children occurs when individuals buy, trade, or sell sexual acts with a child. **Sex trafficking** is “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purposes of a commercial sex act.”¹ Children who are involved in the commercial sex industry are viewed as victims of **severe forms of trafficking in persons**, which is sex trafficking “in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age.”² A **commercial sex act** is “any sex act on account of which anything of value is given to or received by any person.”³

How does a child become a victim?

Pimps and traffickers target vulnerable children and lure them into prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation using psychological manipulation, drugs, and/or violence. Any child may be vulnerable to such a person who promises to meet his or her emotional and physical needs. A trafficker/pimp’s main purpose is to exploit the child for monetary gain. Often traffickers/pimps will create a seemingly loving and caring relationship with their victim in order to establish trust and allegiance. This manipulative relationship tries to ensure the youth will remain loyal to the exploiter even in the face of severe victimization. These relationships may begin online before progressing to a real-life encounter.

Victims are

Targeted – Pimps are predators who seek out vulnerable victims, particularly runaways or children experiencing trouble at home. They know these children have emotional and physical needs they perceive are not being met and use this to their advantage. Pimps find victims at a variety of venues such as in social-networking websites, shopping malls, and schools; on local streets; or at bus stations. While pimps often target children outside of their family, a family member may also prostitute a child.

Tricked – Pimps are willing to invest a great deal of time and effort in their victim to break down a victim’s natural resistance and suspicion – buying them gifts, providing a place to stay, promising a loving relationship – before revealing their true intent. Frequently victims do not realize the deceptive nature of their trafficker’s interest in them, viewing their pimp as a caretaker and/or boyfriend.

Traumatized – A pimp’s use of psychological manipulation (causing the child to truly believe the pimp loves and cares for his or her well-being) coupled with physical control (threats, violence, or drug addiction) can make a victim feel trapped and powerless. This “trauma bond” is difficult to break and long-term treatment and counseling for victims is required.

Despite the seriousness of the problem, the incidence of commercial child sexual exploitation is difficult to measure. Empirical research has not conclusively defined the scope of the problem today. Below, however, are some significant findings from past studies.

Statistics

- Pimps prey on victims as young as 12 to 14 years old.⁴
- One study estimates as many as 325,000 children in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico are at risk each year for becoming victims of sexual exploitation.⁵
- A history of physical and sexual abuse is often common among victims.⁶
- One study estimates 30% of shelter youth and 70% of street youth are victims of commercial sexual exploitation. They may engage or be coerced into prostitution for “survival sex” to meet daily needs for food, shelter, or drugs.⁷

¹Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 [United States of America]. Public Law 106-386 [H.R. 3244]. 28 October 2000. Section 103(9).

²Ibid., Section 103(8).

³Ibid., Section 103(3).

⁴National Report on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking: America’s Prostituted Children. Washington, D.C.: Shared Hope International, 2009, page 30.

⁵R. Estes and N. Weiner. *Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico*. University of Pennsylvania, 2001, page 144.

⁶National Report on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking, op. cit., n 4., page 31.

⁷Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico, op. cit., n. 4, page 131. See also J. Greene, S. Ennett, and C. Ringwalt. (1999) “Prevalence and correlates of survival sex among runaway and homeless youth.” *American Journal of Public Health*. 89(9) page 1406.

Barriers for victims

- **Psychology of Victimization** – Pimps may use force, fraud, or coercion to virtually enslave their victims. Juvenile victims have been controlled by threats of violence to their family; pornographic images taken and used for blackmail or stigmatization; physical, verbal, and sexual abuse. Child victims may be gang-raped to desensitize them to sexual activity prior to victimizing them in prostitution. Victims are taught to not trust law enforcement and may have experienced negative encounters with law-enforcement officers. Victims often remain with pimps out of fear of being physically harmed, having another victim endure physical harm, or a threat to their family members. Pimps have been convicted of plotting to murder cooperative victim witnesses and for the homicide of victims, further instilling fear.
- **“Trauma Bonding”** – This is also common among child victims exploited for commercial sex. The child experiences a strong link to the pimp/exploiter based in what the child perceives as an incredibly intense or important relationship, but one in which there has been an exploitation of trust or power. Emotional bonding is a learned tactic for survival and can be common between exploited children and the exploiter. Advocacy groups working directly with this population note reframing the trauma bond with a pimp/exploiter can take months of therapy and/or residential treatment for the child. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is very common among children exposed to sex trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation and may be characterized by such symptoms as anxiety, depression, insomnia, irritability, flashbacks, emotional numbing, and hyper-alertness.⁶ Victims of commercial child sexual exploitation often have unique needs given the frequent nature of multiple acts of sexual exploitation or violence, by multiple offenders, over potentially a sustained period of time.

More Statistics

- Sex trafficking need not involve actual movement of the victim.⁷
- Pimps may earn hundreds of thousands of dollars every year from selling minors.⁸
- 75% of child victims engaged in prostitution are under the control of a pimp.⁹

What are potential indicators of trafficking and exploitation?

- History of emotional, sexual, or other physical abuse
- Signs of current physical abuse and/or sexually transmitted diseases
- History of running away or current status as a runaway
- Inexplicable appearance of expensive gifts, clothing, or other costly items
- Presence of an older boy-/girlfriend
- Drug addiction
- Withdrawal or lack of interest in previous activities
- Gang involvement

⁶M. Farley. “Bad for the Body, Bad for the Heart: Prostitution Harms Women Even if Legalized or Decriminalized.” *Violence Against Women*. 2004(10), page 1104.

⁷*Fact Sheet: Distinctions Between Human Smuggling and Human Trafficking*. Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of State, Human Smuggling and Trafficking Center. January 2005, page 4.

⁸D. Hughes. *The Demand for Victims of Sex Trafficking*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State. 2005, page 20. Hughes notes the Polaris Project, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization working with victims of human trafficking conducted an informal analysis in 2005 of a pimp’s wages, based on client’s direct accounts. One teenage girl was forced to meet quotas of \$500 a night, seven days a week and gave the money to her trafficker each night. This particular pimp controlled three other women. Based on these numbers, Polaris Project estimates the pimp made \$632,000 in one year from four young women and girls.

⁹*Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico*, op. cit., n. 5, page 60.

If you suspect a case of commercial child sexual exploitation or sex trafficking of children, contact the **National Center for Missing & Exploited Children®** at 1-800-843-5678 or visit www.cybertipline.com
or

the **National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC)** at 1-888-373-7888.

For additional information and resources about Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Human Trafficking, please visit the **Innocence Lost National Initiative** at http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/vc_majorthefts/cac/innocencelost